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C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 002573

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/10/2014

TAGS: KN KS PGOV PREL PINR

SUBJECT: LEE MYUNG-BAK COMES OUT AGAINST OCTOBER SUMMIT

REF: SEOUL 1418

Classified By: A/DCM Joseph Y. Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C) Summary: GNP Presidential Candidate Lee Myung-bak advisor Nam Sung-wook told poloffs on August 23 that newly-crowned GNP candidate Lee was opposed to the proposed October 2-4 North-South Summit because of the effect it could have on the December elections, and because the summit aftermath would, if Lee wins the election, interfere with what should be Lee's 2008 "honeymoon," agenda-setting period. End Summary.

North-South Summit

¶2. (C) One of closest advisors to Lee Myung-bak, Korea University Professor Nam Sung-wook, was quite critical of the upcoming North-South summit. Nam said that the summit could steer the campaign agenda away from the economy -- Lee Myung-bak's strong suit -- toward issues of reconciliation, peace and reunification. Nam feared that expectations and excitement over the summit could create a "tsunami" effect and change the outcome of the presidential election.

¶3. (C) Nam was quite suspicious over the change in summit dates, from end-August to early-October. Insisting that the summit could have taken place in August, Nam said the change in dates was purely a political decision by President Roh Moo-hyun. Nam said that the DPRK's lead official on summit preparations, Vice Chairman of the Asia-Pacific Peace Committee Choe Song-chul, said in meetings August 14 in Kaesong that the road to Pyongyang was not damaged by the floods and the summit could go ahead as planned.

¶4. (C) Nam said that Lee's position was that an August summit, four months before the election, was broadly acceptable. However, a summit just two months ahead of the vote could not but help the ruling camp candidate. Hence, Lee did not speak out against the summit when it was first announced, but came out against it, in a TV interview, after it was rescheduled. Nam said that if Roh wanted to have a summit, he should hold it after December 19, but before February 24, when the next president of Korea will be sworn in.

¶5. (C) Nam was also dismissive on any substantial results from the summit. He said he had been to Pyongyang 14 times

to attend various seminars and meet officials, but that he just did not believe the North's statements, or that the North was ready for fundamental change in its relationship with the South. "They'll sign to get aid," Nam said, referring to a possible summit agreement, which he expected would be much like the previous one in June 15, 2000. In South-North relations, "power matters, not agreements," he concluded.

Comment

¶6. (C) Nam has been associated with Lee Myung-bak since 2002, when the latter was Seoul Mayor quietly considering a run for the Blue House. Since that time, the two have become quite close. We suspect Lee found Nam's conservative views on North Korea policy attractive. Nam is now a prominent member of Lee's expansive foreign policy team, a fixture on television and radio talk shows explaining Lee's position on North Korea. Clearly, Nam's fortunes will change if Lee Myung-bak wins in December.

VERSHBOW